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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 005612

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN POLICY, RHETORIC AND ELECTIONS

Classified By: DCM Daniel A. Russell for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: International issues have received little attention in the run-up to the December 2 Duma elections, reflecting broad consensus behind Putin's foreign policy. Russia's positions on the top issues that do resonate with the Russian public - Kosovo, NATO enlargement, missile defense, CFA and Georgia - have been skillfully marketed to the electorate as proof positive that Russia is back as a great power, its influence is growing vis-a-vis the United States, and its activism on the international scene is essential to contain America's global ambitions. Likewise, Putin's tough talk on U.S.-funded NGOs and ODHIR election observers is another reminder of just how vivid memories of Russia's humiliation and powerlessness in the 1990s remain for the elite and the general public. The attractiveness of Putin's policies and rhetoric on all of these issues has been used to bolster popular support for the President himself and United Russia during the electoral campaign. All politics in Russia will continue to be truly local during the run-up to both this weekend's Duma elections and the presidential contest three months from now, and, in staking out tough foreign policy positions to demonstrate Russia's assertiveness, Putin and other senior officials will likely continue to show little regard for the reaction their statements generate from the United States and Europe. End summary.

#### Foreign Policy Consensus

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¶2. (C) Putin's foreign policy is not up for serious debate. Most voters associate Russian foreign policy with the dramatic and sustained increase in standard of living, the regaining of international respect, and the strengthening of Russia's influence vis-a-vis the U.S. and the West. Specifically, Russia's resolve to publicly challenge the U.S. on key issues like the Iraq war, U.S. MD plans in Europe, NATO expansion, Kosovo, Georgia, and the CFE Treaty resonates well with the political elite and general public alike. Russians vividly remember the hardships and humiliation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and are satisfied with a foreign policy course that restores Russia's "greatness."

¶3. (C) Reliable polling data clearly show that Russians generally accept the claims against the USG and its policies. Most polls suggest that an increasing percentage of Russians "hold a negative impression of the USG" (up to 40% in a Levada poll) and that U.S.-Russian relations will be "tense and hostile" for the next 10-15 years.

¶4. (C) Not surprisingly, opposition politicians on the campaign trail have ignored foreign policy, except to largely endorse Putin's course, while focusing their attention on pocket-book issues. The published platforms of the leading parties, in fact, underscore the strong consensus on foreign

policy issues. It goes without saying that United Russia and the Kremlin-blessed Just Russia fully support and promote the achievements of Putin's foreign policy. To the extent that the Communists and LDPR have criticized the current Putin administration and the pro-Kremlin parties, it is for being too soft on the U.S. and too weak in protecting Russian strategic interests abroad, pointing to the GOR's handling of relations with its neighbors as the clearest example. LDPR leader and Duma candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said in a recent interview that Russia should "show (its) neighbors that a break in ties with Russia would be a lot more painful for them than for us," and he called for the use of energy prices to prevent the Czech Republic and Poland from agreeing to U.S. MD plans.

15. (C) On the other side of the spectrum, the fringe liberal parties/coalitions, including Yabloko, Union of Right Forces, and Other Russia, have been more vocal about the anti-U.S. trends in Russia's foreign policy, but commentators point out that even these parties have voiced only muted criticism, mainly to avoid further damage to their standings in the polls. One of the most Western-leaning (if little known) parties, the Democratic Party of Russia envisions Russia in a European defense alliance without the United States. Undergirding the caution of liberal parties, however, is a genuine disagreement, even among the most pro-Western of commentators and politicians here, with the U.S. support for Kosovo's independence, NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the Saakashvili government in Georgia.

The Enemy at the Gate  
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16. (C) Given the strong domestic support for Putin's foreign  
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policy, the GOR is playing up its foreign policy "successes," particularly its self-proclaimed role as a check against American "hegemony," mainly to help divert attention from the domestic challenges (e.g., food prices, inflation, demographic trends) and to bolster support for Putin and his government in the parliamentary and presidential elections. Accusations by Putin regarding U.S. "meddling" in Russia's electoral process are the most recent examples of the Kremlin's efforts to rally voters against an external enemy, tapping not-so-latent Russian sentiments that the West (read U.S.) does not want a strong Russia.

17. (C) Putin has sharpened his criticism of alleged U.S. assistance to opposition parties and NGOs, and warned that outsiders should keep their "snotty noses" out of Russian affairs. State television reinforced these official statements by broadcasting (one week before the December 2 elections) an expose on the "direct links" between the November 24-25 protests led by opposition organization Other Russia and alleged U.S.-funded efforts to foment an orange revolution in Russia. GOR officials have also reacted angrily to ODHIR's recent decision not to send observers to monitor the Duma elections. On November 26, Putin told a group of young United Russia leaders that the State Department was behind ODHIR's decision, and FM Lavrov earlier blamed ODHIR for the problems with accreditation that prompted its pullout.

18. (C) In addition to alleged links between opposition political parties and the West, voters have been frequently offered by Putin and others a history of the 1990s that had Europe and the United States dictating terms to a Russia on its knees. Putin's campaign stump speech reminds voters of that "fact" and contrasts it with the independent, self-assertive Russia he presides over today. Running through this fall's campaign has been a comment falsely but persistently attributed to former Secretary of State Albright that Russia "unjustly" controls the lion's share of the world's natural resources. The alleged quote has surfaced in

Putin's national open line with Russian citizens and has been alluded to in at least two other of his televised appearances to suggest that the United States is unhappy with Russia's current prosperity and would end it if it could.

¶9. (C) Even among liberal critics of Putin, such as Russia in Global Affairs editor Fedor Lukyanov, the GOR is able to tap the resentment of Western efforts to hold Russia up to a measuring stick. Lukyanov wrote a lengthy op-ed in Gazeta.ru that vigorously defended the official reaction to the ODHIR decision. Lukyanov asserted that the GOR was not interested in manipulating the ODIHR mission; in fact, Russia's democracy is sufficiently developed and does not need to be "quality certified" by outsiders. Lukyanov repeated familiar arguments that ODHIR maintains lower standards for Western or Western-leaning governments, and cited the relatively favorable assessment of Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections as an example.

Comment

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¶10. (C) As one commentator told us, Russia's current foreign policy "transcends even Putin." Russia's assertive international course is in harmony with the fundamental views and concerns of most Russians. Not surprisingly, Putin, his administration and United Russia have all ratcheted up claims of success and the rhetoric on the international front during this electoral campaign period. It is telling that little, if any, thought seems to have been given to the reaction this tough talk would predictably engender from the West. We expect this trend to continue through next March, as presidential succession continues to be the top issue occupying Putin and his retinue.  
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